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Community

Residents hope to replace lightkeeper

Patriot Ledger Staff

PLYMOUTH — Residents of the Gurnet have no electrical service, no telephones and little contact with the mainland.

They don't want to lose one of their last links to the rest of the world — a manned Coast Guard lighthouse.

Rather than wait a half-hour for Plymouth police to reach their secluded peninsula in an emergency, Gurnet residents want to put their own policeman in the lighthouse, which the Coast Guard plans to automate later this year.

For most residents, the lighthouse provides their only telephone and their only link to the police department, fire department and hospitals on the mainland.

In October, that tie will be severed when the Coast Guard replaces the lightkeeper and his family with an automated system.

So members of the Gurnet-Saquish Corp., the non-profit association that represents eight full-time residents and 200 summer cottage owners, have suggested replacing the departing Coast Guard family with a security guard.

"He could act as a watchman for the whole beach," said Joy M. Bruni, the association's president. "The lighthouse is very historic, and if it is empty, it will deteriorate in no time."

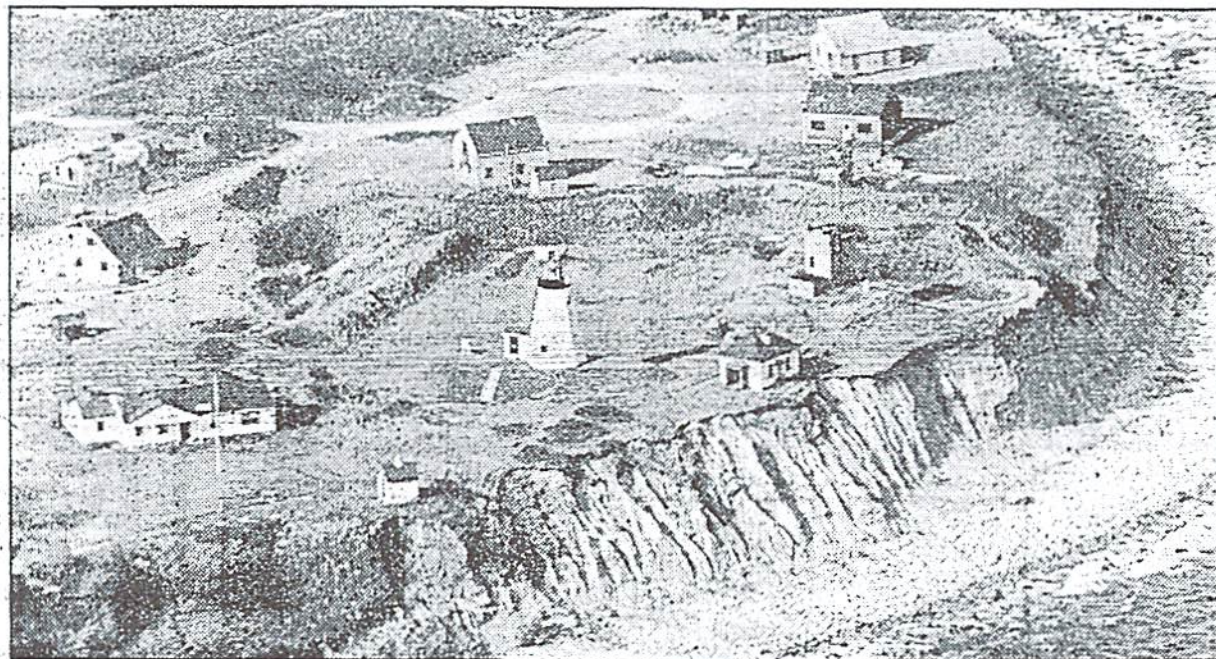
Coast Guard officials have not accepted the group's still-tentative proposal, but they like the idea.

"The Coast Guard family will be there until the automation is completed," said Terry M. Cramer of the 1st Coast Guard District in Boston. "We'd like it so there is no overlap. We move out. They move in."

The Coast Guard originally planned to have the lighthouse automated by July. However, because of a recent budget crunch, the date was pushed back. The Coast Guard now expects the work to be finished by October, the start of the next federal fiscal year, Cramer said.

"With the state-of-the-art equipment we have, we can automate and monitor the light and foghorn," he said. "The service to the mariner will be the same."

A fog detector installed at the lighthouse will turn on



File photo

Residents of the Gurnet want a security guard to be stationed in the lighthouse after the Coast Guard automates the light and foghorn.

and turn off the foghorn as necessary, Cramer said.

Gurnet Point, a peninsula that juts into the Atlantic, is legally part of Plymouth, but the only land route to the mainland is across five miles of dunes that lead to Duxbury. Plymouth is three miles away by boat but 25 miles away by land.

Association members recently have talked about breaking away from Plymouth to either form a new town or become part of Duxbury or Marshfield.

The U.S. House of Representatives recently adopted a \$2.2 billion Coast Guard budget for the coming fiscal

year, an increase of \$95 million from current levels. That measure still needs Senate and White House approval.

The Coast Guard has been responsible for the 143-year-old lighthouse since 1939. Current lighthouse keeper Joseph M. Robicheau, a Coast Guard officer, has been living there for 18 months with his wife and two children.

"I take care of the maintenance of the station, turn the light on and turn it off," Robicheau said Thursday. "I make sure the fog signal is (activated) on a day like today."

Residents say his presence, like that of his predecessors, has provided a sense of security.

with watchman

Plymouth

"The fact that there are people there year-round, they can look out the windows and see if something visible happens," Bruni said. "They have helped rescue vehicles (like fire trucks). They have helped people whose cars get stuck. They have direct radio contact (with the mainland)."

Gurnet Point has been without telephone service since the Blizzard of 1978 knocked down the wires, she said, but the Coast Guard has a microwave telephone at the lighthouse. Residents may use it in medical emergencies, Robicheau said.

The lighthouse is equipped with a 12,000-gallon storage tank and 500 feet of hose, so the keeper also can help put out any nearby fire, Robicheau said.

The first lighthouse on Gurnet Point was built in 1768. The current lighthouse was built in 1843 and was maintained by the U.S. Lighthouse Service until the service merged with the Coast Guard, Cramer said.

Of 446 Coast Guard lighthouses, only 25 are still manned, according to Robert C. Hayden, lighthouse officer at the Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C. "She (Gurnet Light) is one of the few left," he said.

Most of the remaining manned lighthouses are in Maine, he said. And the Coast Guard plans to automate all of them.

About 70 of the automated lighthouses now have local caretakers, Hayden said. The caretakers must be local governments or non-profit organizations.

The Gurnet-Saquish association has sent the Coast Guard a letter of intent, but the group's directors will not vote to make the proposal official until they have investigated its legal consequences, Bruni said.

A Coast Guard decision on the proposal will be made before the light is automated, and property owners will be given notice of plans for the Robicheaus' departure, Cramer said.

"You won't wake up one morning and find them gone," he said.